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John Muir Newsletter, September/December 1983

Holt-Atherton Pacific Center for Western Studies

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JOHN MUIR NEWSLETTER



Holt-Atherton Pacific Center
for Western Studies

University of the Pacific
Stockton, Calif 95211

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NUMBER 5

EDITORIAL STAFF: RONALD H. LIMBAUGH, KIRSTEN E. LEWIS

CATCHING UP

We apologize for the delay in distributing this final newsletter of 1983. Our intentions were to keep the publication bimonthly if possible, but the fall workload and the delay in NEH funding news kept us from turning out a September-October edition. We are grateful for your patience and understanding.

FUNDING UPDATE

As anticipated in our last newsletter, the National Endowment for the Humanities has contributed \$20,000 to the John Muir Papers Microform Project. The award, announced September, matches an equal amount previously received from two Bay Area private foundations, the L. J. and Mary C. Skaggs Foundation of Oakland and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation of Palo Alto. The NEH funding will serve in lieu of National Historical Publications and Records Commission support for the 1984 calendar year. Altogether the Project has received over \$80,000 in 1983 from a funding consortium including two federal agencies, two private organizations, and one individual contributor.

PROJECT UPDATE

Despite a full fall teaching load for the Project Director this fall and a two-week hiatus by our Assistant Editor, whose attendance at the Association for Documentary Editing Conference in Baltimore demonstrated the viability of the Muir Project to the eastern documentary "establishment," the Stockton office recently has been about as busy as a resident of one of Muir's California Bee-Pastures. To assist with the clerical backlog this fall we hired Joanne Tashima, a University of the Pacific student who is working halftime. Also on the Muir staff is another student, Rosemary Bernal, who has been with us on a part-time basis since 1981. Counting Vicki Fortuni and Chris Padgett, two UOP student volunteers who serve as research assistants from time to time, the Muir staff has grown considerably as we gear up for the filming phase which is scheduled to begin early next year.

CALL FOR A NEW MUIR CONFERENCE

"John Muir: Life and Heritage" will be the theme of the 38th annual California History Institute to be held April 12-13, 1985 at the University of the Pacific. This event is planned to mark the anticipated completion of the John Muir Papers Microform Project, which was kicked off with a special Muir Conference held at the University in the fall of 1980. The enthusiastic response to that event, which brought scholars and Muir fans from around the country together for two days of specialized study and discussion, has provided the inspiration for this second Muir Conference. Proposals for papers and programs should be sent to Ronald H. Limbaugh, Muir Project Director, or to John Porter Bloom, Institute Director, at the Holt-Atherton Pacific Center for Western Studies, University of the Pacific, Stockton, California 95211, no later than October 1, 1984. Papers are desired on a broad range of topics related to Muir, his work and his legacy. Especially desirable are works of original research and creative scholarship. If accepted, papers should be made available for possible inclusion in a later edition of the Pacific Historian.

FROM THE MUIR COLLECTION

(Editor's note: The lengthy article that follows has been divided into two parts. The second half will be included in the next newsletter. Found among a collection of unidentified clippings in the Muir papers, it was apparently published in a San Francisco newspaper early in 1897.)

OUR OWN THOREAU, HARDY JOHN MUIR

Juliet Wilbor Tompkins

A man who has lifted up his whole life unto the hills, has a strange fascination for those who live in cities, and for whom the mountains mean little more than skyline and background. John Muir has gone through experiences as foreign to most of us as though he had lived on a different planet, and it was with an intense curiosity about these and their effects that I went to find him, though of course I was armed with a quest.

I had gone to many women and told them that the birds of California were being flayed by thousands, so that there would soon be no more left. And they said yes, it was a pity, and the bristling wings on their hats had nodded sympathetically. Then I had gone to the men and told them the same tale. "It's too bad," they had agreed, and had feasted on robins and meadow larks as comfortable as before. Being somewhat faint-hearted, I would have given up the struggle, but some one suggested: "Go and see what the California Thoreau says about it." So, glad of the excuse, I set out to find John Muir.

Three miles from Martinez, separated from it by a squishy road not unlike a chocolate pudding, there is a valley shaped like the little boats that are made by folding and refolding a square of paper. On the mound in the center stands John Muir's house, a big square, modern conventionality, with a square cupola on top and a square porch in front, looking squarely up and down the valley

in proud oblivion of the adobe that sits humbly down by the gate, serving as lodge for the usurper. As we approached thousands of robins whirled up on every side, as though to show us that we had come to the right place.

John Muir met us with a cordiality that had a touch of shyness in it, though this vanished as soon as we were safely inside what he calls his den. It was a good-sized room with a pleasant outlook, but its chief feature was its open fire. One would think that a man with a passion for icebergs would pay little attention to temperature, but it seemed as though he could not get heat enough to balance the nights and days he had spent in the chilly company of his pet glacier. It was a reckless, open-hearted fire, thoroughly masculine, for no woman could have found it in her heart to pile on five logs at once, or to deny the gaping coal scuttle the great powdery mass of ashes that must have been growing for days. "The White Pine" lay face down on a chair, and in every corner of the room were tucked specimens, ghosts of flowers, miniature horns, cones and branches, all held sacred from profane dusting, or, indeed, from any kind. Some paintings by Keith and two mammoth desks did most of the furnishing.

"If the slaughter goes on, soon there won't be a bird left in California," I said, somewhat helplessly. "What do you say to that?"

"I say it's an infernal shame," said the California Thoreau, with cheering heartiness. "People don't realize. Why there isn't a woman who could sit by and see you kill a bird to trim her up with. It isn't cruelty; it's thoughtlessness. Laws won't do much good unless they're backed up by public opinion, and to rouse that you've got to organize your sympathizers into a public body. You must have Presidents and committees and by-laws and resolutions and reports, if you want to make the public take you seriously. I found that out in the matter of protecting the trees in Yosemite. Here I was, crying in the wilderness for twenty years, and not the faintest impression could I make. The papers printed my articles, and people said, 'Oh, yes, John Muir--he's romantic!' or, 'Very pretty ideas, but he doesn't understand sheep-raising.' Finally several of us joined together and formed the Sierra Club, and we found that that could do what none of us could accomplish alone. Impress people with your importance as a body, and then they'll listen to you."

"But don't you suppose your crying prepared the way for the work of the society?" I asked, hoping to hear more of the wilderness, for the very word Sierra is full of mysterious charm.

"It is hard to tell. A great deal of our success was due to Mr. R. U. Johnson, the associate editor of the 'Century,' you know." I nodded, having met his politely regretful signature more than once. "He and I were lying by our camp-fire in Tuolumne Meadows, and he complained of the barrenness of the country, which had been described to him as a garden. I told him that he didn't understand sheep-raising, which involved the cropping off of every spear that dared lift its head above ground. Well, we talked it over for days, and in the end I agreed to write a series of articles on the subject for the 'Century.' These drew people's attention, the matter was brought up before Congress, and a year and a month from the night in Tuolumne Meadows, United States cavalry were patrolling the reserve. We've secured two other national parks, the Garfield and the Sequoia, and what we are aiming at now is to extend government protection to all the other reserves. It wouldn't be a big undertaking, for one cavalryman is equal to a good many mountain sheep. We'll get it in time."

He talked slowly, with a slight accent that should have been Scotch, to accord with his name and his startlingly blue eyes, but might as well have been down East or Middle West. His subject absorbed him so deeply that he forgot all about his listeners, except when a laugh at some expression or adventure made him raise his eyes from the fire with a sudden flash of humorous recognition. He had a droll, easy-going way of telling things, but for all that he would be neither led nor driven conversationally, but must choose his own path, however adroitly another was suggested. One sees in him the Scotch boy who, landing in New York, coolly started out to walk to Florida and see the country; the young man who worked all his winters in a saw mill that his summers might be spent on the mountains; and the scientist of many distinctions, Yale's honorary degree among them. His learnedness sits lightly, almost boyishly, upon him, and the gray hair, long beard and thin form cannot subdue an air of youth and of slumbering enterprise. An old Chinese proverb says that "A good man loves the mountains, but a wise man loves the sea." John Muir has known and loved them both.

(to be continued)

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